"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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PACIFIC SCHOOL OF RELIGION

PUTTING CULTURE INTO AGRICULTURE

By Erland Nelson *

A large volume would be necessary to present the merest background of trends, figures, movements, and underlying philosophy back of a farm program which we are to try to sketch here in its more obvious aspects within the space of a few pages. Just by way of background, the reader is referred to the great movements toward the city through a number of decades, the recent reversal of this trend, the cessation of immigration, the end of homesteading on the cheap lands, the rise and concentration of control of industry, the automatic machines and technological unemployment.

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF FOREIGN MISSIONS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH U.S.A.

In an earlier day, the farming population represented a fair sample of the nation as a whole--possibly even somewhat superior. Immigrants included the progressive, restless spirits who frequently made excellent leaders. When farm youth reached maturity, the more able, together with the less able, staked out new fences and expanded the farming community. Today a new trend is in evidence. (Remember that a sociological "trend" allows for thousands of exceptions both as to communities and individuals.) This tendency is for the ablest of our farm youth to seek other types of vocations. Our colleges and universities have played no small part in this selective process. Schools have selected the most capable young people from the farms, those who passed their high school courses creditably. Those who passed with high honors were even granted financial assistance in order to induce them to enter college. All of that was perhaps good, but what did the higher school do with these capable young people from the farm? Those who failed to make good in college or who for financial or other reasons could not continue their courses were permitted to go back to the farm. If they succeeded in college, they rarely went back to the farm. They have been and are encouraged to enter the "white collar" vocations or the professions. They are encouraged to enter teaching, law, medicine, business, engineering, and other fields. Every church school has been active in draining our own farm communities in this matter.

The large universities have done on a large scale what we have done on a small scale. Even the agricultural colleges have admittedly been working in the same direction--away from actual farm life. The writer asked Dean Freeman of the

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*Dr. Erland Nelson, the author, was born on a farm near Ruskin, Nebraska, in 1897. His parents were Danish immigrants. He was connected with a country Lutheran Church in his home community until he left for college. He farmed for four years on his own responsibility. He has taught rural school, was superintendent of high schools, professor and then president of Dana College, Blair, Nebraska, from 1929 to 1936. At present he is Professor of Education at Newberry College, Newberry, South Carolina. Professor Nelson holds the degrees of A.M. and Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska. He has also done graduate work at the Universities of Chicago and Minnesota. In a recent letter he wrote: "Each year I attracted some of the finest rural youth to college only to see them a few years later enter other fields and bid the farm farewell." His article grows out of wide experience and deep conviction.

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Agricultural College of the University of Minnesota last summer as to what became of his graduates. His prompt reply was that most of them were placed in the big cereal industries of Twin Cities. What of actual farming? The reply to our Seminar was to the effect that no farmer could expect to earn three or four thousand dollars from farming to pay for an agricultural education. A few years ago, the writer visited the outstanding agricultural college located at Ames, Iowa. Some of the same questions were asked the Registrar, Dr. Sage, with the answer that almost three-fourths of their graduates go into some branch of engineering. When from that remaining one-fourth we subtract all of those who go into Smith-Hughes teaching, those who become county agents, expert agronomists, cow testers, erosion technicians, and other types of specialists, how many graduates are left to become small independent farmers? Rather, how few in comparison to the youth population of that state--how few compared to the enrollment of that large institition! And that was Iowa--a rich agricultural state. In Nebraska, the situation is admittedly the same. We teach experts, teachers, specialists to live, not on a farm to demonstrate their ability, but in a nearby city to tell the farmer "how it's done."

To return to the liberal arts colleges: We have been busy turning the faces of our students away from the farm, not only through the absence of farm offerings, but also through the courses which we do give in our curriculum. Our schools have frowned upon such subjects as rural landscaping, rural sociology, or rural economics. Even schools located in the agricultural middle west--whose students come from the farms or have intimate country connections--have assumed that sociology or economics must primarily concern itself with city life, industry, working conditions in factories, slum clearance, and the like. Right or wrong, from the moment a boy or girl enters college until he graduates, the colleges have resolutely pointed them away from the farms from which they have come. And Youth has not been unwilling to be attracted by the alluring idea of "steady" salary, prestige, white collar, and inside work. The other side of the picture is too often ignored, as is also the possibility of an attractive life on the farm. With the steadily increasing enrollments in colleges and universities, it is not hard to guess what such practices will do to the farming communities of America in another half century. If America as a nation would keep as a stabilizing force and as its backbone an intelligent, vigorous rural population, we cannot long continue the process of impoverishing the rural homes as we have impoverished many of our soils. Here is a national problem.

Farming, One of the Liberal Arts

What are the implications for higher education? Certainly not that our liberal arts colleges should cease teaching chemistry, biology, languages, literature, art, music, and other subjects. Nor that our church colleges should cease preparing public school teachers, musicians, commercial people, and leaders in other fields of human endeavor. The liberal arts colleges which originally concerned themselves chiefly with philosophy, religion, astronomy, mathematics, and languages, have from time to time opened their doors to new fields as research has brought light to new areas of human knowledge. Alchemy finally became the now respectable chemistry given in every liberal arts college. Nature study and the uncritical observations of early philosophers gave way to the sciences of botany, zoology and other studies. Liberal arts colleges now quite generally open their doors to music and art and to some professional studies, particularly in the field of education. We now propose that the liberal arts college accept, rebuild and refine one of the oldest, one of the most fundamental, one of the most universal, and one of the most complicated and difficult of the human arts, namely, farming. This does not mean developing the science of agriculture--it means applying the discoveries of modern science to farming. It means rebuilding the dignity of farming. It means farming, not as a mere means to great wealth, but farming as a way of life. It means putting farming on such a plane that the most brilliant student will seriously ask himself whether medicine, law, or other professions can begin to provide so enduring values and so rich a life as farming in the new way.

Our colleges have always claimed to "prepare for life." This proposal would add, "also for life on the farm." Students choosing the farm will continue the study of religion, literature, philosophy, music, as do the students planning to enter other vocations. Obviously, we do not visualize a narrow technical education, but a broad liberal education seeking the development of the complete personality. Some of these well-rounded personalities will choose the art of farming as others will continue to choose teaching. The old liberal arts program will continue to furnish the educational background for all students regardless of the field of life chosen.

A number of factors combine to make such a program feasible at this time. Our liberal arts colleges are well-organized and operating. In the field of agricultural research, this country has an efficient army of scientists who are constantly at work and who have now accumulated a tremendous amount of scientific material which needs only general application to farming methods. Modern farm machinery eliminates much of the old drudgery. However, the rise of the machine on the farm does not threaten to enslave man as it is said to have done in industry. There are fundamental differences between the two. The automatic machine and the conveyor and assembly line may be economical in the factory system. On the farm, we have seen the passing of the gigantic custom threshing outfits and the substitution of small individual units. The huge 12-plow tractors did not drive out the farmers. These machines themselves disappeared and we now see the popularity of the small, light one or two-plow type. Instead of enslaving the farmer, machinery should be used to lessen human toil. Shorter hours of work are possible, giving more time for other cultural pursuits. Furthermore, our Federal government, we believe, will continue its efforts in sponsoring farming on a basis which will be at least reasonably profitable.

Effect on Our Lutheran Church

Our Lutheran Church has been, and a large part of it still is, essentially a church of the smaller cities and the rural communities. Ask our pastors who have been serving rural communities a decade or more, as to what has become of many of their most promising confirmands. What has become of the most active boys and girls for whose education your farmer members have paid out thousands of dollars? Even at Dana College, where we certainly have the cooperation of pastors and congregations, if it is had in any church school, do we find that most of our teaching graduates must and do secure their positions in towns in which we have no congregations. This is not without certain advantages. Yet if a program could be evolved which would bring more of our students back to the congregations from which they came, we should certainly be able to build stronger congregations, right where we now have churches. The field of home missions is no longer wide open since we give due consideration to other church bodies. Our place for building, then, is in the churches we now have, the places where we have or can have active pastors. If we could send back to the home community trained people who could and would work with the pastor, build Christian homes in the community, help to make the situation so that the pastor does not become only the servant, but also the spiritual leader supported by a powerful group of well-trained, Christian, cultured workers, living and working with him right where he is, the effect upon the work of our churches would be incalculable.

Effect upon General Community Life

A look at what agricultural schools have done for Denmark is the strongest indication of what might be possible in this country. With many young people trained in the best methods of farming and with a strong background in the liberal arts, we should see new intellectual life in American rural communities. We should expect to see evidence of such education in the landscaping of farm homes, parks, the erection of libraries. We should see it in community singing, in demands for and appreciation of the best in art, music, literature. There would be call for

lecturers on cultural subjects and a new emphasis placed upon education in the home, the church, and the school. Several of the aims presented in the Lutheran Seminar publications from Chicago and from Minneapolis would see fruition here. And with the leadership of a community in such hands, who would not choose the rural community as a most desirable place in which to live, to grow, to rear one's family. The arts and the sciences are at hand. One's spiritual life is likely to be deeper here. It is a place where the personality can unfold without the punching of a time clock or the ringing of an electric bell. Here should be the place for one truly to appreciate the beauties which man has expressed in literature, art, music, or to wrestle with the problems of philosophy and science. Here especially should one learn to love God's revealed Word and to get an intimate understanding and appreciation of God's handiwork with which no one is in closer daily communion than the alert, appreciative farmer.

Who Should Begin?

If such a program is valid for American life, which institutions should begin it? If it is true that the church has a responsibility for the education of her children even when they seek to enter teaching, commerce, music, and other fields closely allied with the liberal arts, then we believe the church also has a responsibility to those of her children who may desire to enter farming. Since more of her children would probably enter farming than any one of the vocations now offered, it would seem that if resources are limited, farming should not be the one to be omitted.

Note: The C.R.F. has printed Dr. Nelson's article because we believe it to be one of the most thoughtful of its kind in recent years and deserves wide and sincere consideration. Its significance must not be confused with the lack of enthusiasm with which it will probably be received in many quarters. Although the article was written with the Lutheran Church particularly in mind, it is no less significant to scores of other denominations in America. Let us not deceive ourselves as to the lack of responsibility which church colleges feel generally toward Christian rural America. Indeed, by and large, any sense of responsibility seems to be non-existent. The following appeared several years ago in the correspondence columns of a church magazine published by a denomination that takes particular pride in the large number of its church colleges, and this seemed to illustrate excellently the current attitude. The article was under the caption, "WE APOLOGIZE."

"Dear Editor:--Someone inadvertently worded a news note about _____ College which we enclose which does not do the college any good. In fact, it is likely to counteract the effect of the paid advertising we carry in _____. 'Rural' is no word to describe a standard four-year college. No one, even a boy from the farm or a village, expects to go to a 'rural school' to college. I know no one connected with the paper or the board would intentionally frame a statement to reflect on a college, but someone made a slip this time, and we would like a good news note to do what it can to change the impression. (Signed) _____, President."

"How the word 'rural' slipped in as a description of _____ College, in the December number of THE _____ MAGAZINE, no one knows. Our humble apologies to the President of a sterling, standard college.--Editor"

It is a well-known fact that the population of America is being maintained by the excess of births over deaths in rural America. Large towns and cities are not reproducing themselves. The only possible conclusion that one can come to in the face of such facts is that there is absolutely no hope of a Christian America unless and until we Christianize the countryside. This is a task that certainly is worthy of any college that maintains Christian standards and a prophetic relationship to the future of the Christian church.---J.H.R.